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ABSTRACT

Viewing the myth of Sisyphus as a metaphor for the vast numbers of high school students and teachers who go through daily school rituals unable to discover personal meaning in their work, this report applies the existential philosophy of Albert Camus and other existentialists to the methodology of Teaching and learning English in high schools. The report builds an argument toward the conclusion that the assembly line model of secondary education is failing many students in basic ways, and that "authenticity"--one of Camus' philosophical watchwords--in the teaching of composition can enable teachers to engage the subjectivity of students who would otherwise become disaffected with learning. Sections of the report discuss a rationale for subjective research by high school teachers, why high schools are environments conducive to existential questions, the theoretical background of existentialism and its relationship to education, high school existentialists, the existentialist as teacher, the existentialist as student, and existential English lesson plans. (RL)

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If Sisyphus Went to High School:

An Existential Approach to Learning

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Los Angeles, April 17, 1981

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INTRODUCTION

It is said that teaching is an inarticulate profession. Unlike military men, politicians, men of letters, etc., teachers generally prefer not to write and publish their memoirs. Perhaps this is out of a feeling that teaching is "common knowledge" in the sense that practically everyone in this society participates first-hand in the institutionalized teaching/learning process. The work at hand holds as common sense the proposition that the memoirs of teachers may be as useful and interesting as those of other professionals. There is support for this position in current curriculum literature.

Recently curricularists Grumet and Pinar (1976) have advocated the "autobiographical method" as a valid form of research. This paper agrees and posits that the autobiographies of experienced teachers can be extremely valuable as research. Eisner (1979) has spoken of "portrayal" as a valid research technique and of "connoisseurship" as a practical method of improving instruction. This paper agrees and posits that the connoisseurs are the practitioners who have devoted many years to the practice of teaching and that the untold portrayals of actual teachers hold valuable information for an educational research community of whose members a sizable percentage has not spent a significant amount of time in the actual practice of educating children. In addition, probably an even greater percentage has long ago ceased having any sort of meaningful contact with the elementary and secondary schools about which they speculate. Finally, this paper posits that the subject matter specialties of teachers can be capitalized upon to provide unique vantage points for the study of education. Therefore, the research methodology of this paper consists of autobiography, portrayal, and connoisseurship. In addition, it employs the subject area expertise of

its author in using literary research (as advocated by Maxine Greene, for one) as an appropriate method for analyzing educational problems.

The instrument for this research was a human organism forged by ten years of experience teaching high school English, four years sponsoring a yearbook, experience developing and implementing curricula, and experience coaching and sponsoring basketball tournaments in Chicago inner-city high schools. This experience was tempered by a master's degree in 19th and 20th Century Literature and doctoral studies in curriculum, evaluation research, and public policy analysis.

A RATIONALE FOR SUBJECTIVE RESEARCH

I am in complete sympathy with those who advocate connoisseurship, the refinement of the human organism as an instrument of evaluation and research. I have been trained in the arts, literature in particular; and I understand the importance of criticism and dialectic in refining and expanding one's perception. I understand it because I have experienced it, and this is the most authentic way of knowing.

But this knowledge is personal, not general; and, while it may be authentic, it is also very difficult to demonstrate to others in such a way as to be easily perceived, I may know that I and others around me have grown, improved, learned; but how do I objectify that subjective knowledge in such a way that most people will also "know" what I know?

As a researcher I need ways to objectify my perceptions of [illegible]t and how much people have learned so that this knowledge may become general.

A good illustration of this difficulty is provided by Elliot W. Eisner in The Educational Imagination (1979) where he presents examples of educational criticism. His students report upon and critique particular classrooms with the aim of improving them. Let us sympathize with Eisner's belief that such criticism will improve practice. It is

certainly a plausible idea. Eisner (1979) says, "But theory in education must be translated into courses of action if it is to be useful. Somehow what one believes must be transformed into policy and practice, aim and aspiration." This means going from the particular to the general. How? How do we implement connoisseurship? How do we go from isolated examples to pervasive influence?

First of all, we will need to be able to communicate to people that connoisseurship really results in improvement. This assertion of itself without empirical evidence will not buy me much, and it should not. Since the collection, analysis and reporting of data are entirely at my discretion, my conclusions may be the result of bias or personal interests rather that a "real" assessment of what exists. The purpose of quantitative research is to reduce bias and the influences of personal interests by obtaining results by way of a medium which is relatively free of these influences. Quantitative research objectifies phenomena by counting units of measurement. Result? Quantities. Quantities enable us to compare. They also provide a way for us to agree about things that is based upon something firmer than opinion. Quantitative studies are also subject to bias, but clear descriptions of methods and clear operational definitions can reduce it.

Of course, numbers mean nothing without interpretation, but they do provide a foundation on which we may stand and fight. They provide the evidence we need to bolster our cases (theories); whereas, otherwise we would often attempt to convict with hearsay and circumstantial evidence. Science builds arguments. Arguments can be based on the logic of great quantities of on that of a few cases. The key is the power to convince. Quantitative studies convince using the objective logic of size and numbers. Qualititative studies convince by appealing to our subjective

conception of the world based in experience.

Bob Toben (1975) says, "Scientific, experimental proof is not extremely important. Instruments and observers can connect with other 'illusions'." He is right. Mankind creates his reality, his culture, and the scientific creation is as imaginative as is the artistic creation (Bronowski, 1965). But to say that it is "not extremely important" is to deny the importance of this culture which we have created; and upon which Toben's own book, for example, is based. If science is not important, why does Toben rely on it so heavily? Our culture, founded in science and art, is important. It is our shared reality.

Toben may be right when he says there are "equally 'real' realities," but they will not exist separate from our act of creation. Science is important because it is our method of creation. It is a method which enables us to share "illusions." When that sharing becomes unimportant, science will be unimportant.

Bronowski (1965) points out that science enables us to create a richer reality than those of cultures without science.

> The Bushman and the Indian peassant have not been cowed by science.... They have failed in culture: in making a picture of the universe rich enough: subtle enough--one that they can work with and live by beyond the level of the Stone Age.

Bronowski is right. By any practical, civilized standards, science has enabled Western Man to create a rich, complex reality founded in sensate awareness. Toben is also right insofar as he attempts to enrich or expand Western consciousness, but he is wrong to attempt to demean it. Therefore, let it be clear that this paper does not in any way oppose scientific method based on the quantification of phenomena. Rather it embraces quantitative research as an indispensable way of knowing, while

at the same time arguing that quantitative research alone is not sufficient.

Let us return to the qualitative vs. quantitative problem as it relates to actual practice in education. Education is, indeed, a practical endeavor. Schwab (1969) and others have compared its practice to that of medicine. The analogy is useful. A major goal of medical science is to provide understanding of and care for the human body so that people will be enabled to live long and comfortable lives. A major goal of educational research is to provide understanding of the ways in which people learn with the aim of enabling them to obtain information which will allow them to manipulate their environment so that they may live long and comfortable lives.

In both medicine and education certain general practices and policies can cause dramatic improvements where medical and educational care have been lacking. In Guatemala, for example, disease and ignorance are the common condition. A system of sanitation, adequate diet, and an innoculation program would alleviate the majority of the country's health problems. Likewise, a system of general education from age 5 to age 16 would cause a tremendous increase in the general educational level of Guatemalans. Obviously, the principal cause of Guatemalas's plight is its poverty.

The United States, however, as a function (in great part) of its wealth, has one of the healthiest and best educated populations on earth (National Center for Education Statistics, 1976). Americans have the enviable problem of improving an already good condition. The U.S. is at the point where general policies in medicine and education are yielding diminishing returns. Both disciplines must hope to motivate because they can no longer legislate. For example, medicine could significantly

improve the general health picture if it could convince all Americans to stop smoking. Likewise, education could significantly increase national reading scores if it could convince people to shut off the televisions and pick up books instead. Neither of these cure-alls is likely to happen.

Instead, medicine and education will go on attempting to improve the general picture with local cures. In this effort, it would appear that medicine has distinct advantages. First of all, it has the luxury of being able to treat volunteers. People go to doctors when they are in pain and discomfort or for the prevention of pain and discomfort. Teachers do not often have such a willing clientele.

Secondly, medical practice is specialized to a much greater degree than is education. This allows diagnosticians to refer patients to appropriate doctors for appropriate treatment, a tremendously efficient and effective practice. Although education is becoming more specialized, its diagnostics are still crude and its treatments still insensitive to individual differences, needs, and wants.

Thirdly, medicine has been able to capitalize upon the vast improvements in technology that have taken place in the last thirty years whereas educational technology is still searching for its appropriate role. Once again it would appear that an important function of medical practice which is still in a primitive state in education is diagnosis and assignment to special treatment.

So far, this comparison of education to medicine would support an educational research model like that of Robert Glaser. Glaser's model includes specification of learning outcomes (using CRT's); diagnosis of initial state, instructional alternatives; continuous assessment; adaptation and optimization (via aptitude-treatment interaction); and

evolutionary operation (incremental improvement) (D. Hamilton, et al., 1977). This sort of educational treatment is extremely promising and may pay great dividends of the sort which medicine has paid, but in important ways it is inappropriate for education. Robert Stake states the case effectively when he says:

> Consensus is one of the great simplifiers. Theory is another. Statistical processes are simplifiers. Test scores are simple representations of the complex. These simplifiers help us by reducing the phenomena to something within our power of comprehension. But they mislead us by saying that education is much less than it really is. We work day by day with the simplifications--the statements of objectives, the central tendencies, the criterion tests--and we become transfixed by them, losing our awareness of the fundamental activities of teaching and learning. We do it to ourselves and we do it to our audiences. Evaluators should be helping people keep in touch with the reality of instruction, but our scrapbooks are full of enlargements of enlargements...(Hamilton, 1977).

The medical approach treats the human organism as an object. For the most part this is appropriate for a discipline which is primarily concerned with the health of the human body; and, in many ways, it is appropriate for the learning situation. Education can be seen as the process of diagnosing people's learning needs, problems, or ills and treating them in such a way that they are satisfied, solved, or cured. It can be seen as a way of aiding people to optimize their potential as medicine intends to optimize health. But, whereas medicine deals with the human body, an object; education deals with the whole person, object and subject. This is an essential distinction. Therefore, whereas the objective approach of researchers like Robert Glaser is necessary, it is not sufficient; to be sufficient an educational strategy must also engage the subjectivity of the learner.

What is subjectivity? To understand subjectivity one should first understand what is meant by the phrase, "Existence precedes essence."

Jean-Paul Sartre, probably the chief modern proponent of existentialism, provides a useful definition:

> What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards defines himself. If man, as the existentialist sees him is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterwards will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be.... Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence. Man is nothing other than what he makes himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism. It is what is called "subjectivity" (Kneller, 1964).

The idea that "existence precedes essence" is opposed to the traditional, Western, Platonic view that the "essence precedes existence," in other words that mankind and all creation have an inherent purpose and meaning. This is a very important distinction. The Platonist tries to discover the inherent meanings in the world, the "nature" of things. But the existentialist begins with the understanding that all existence is meaningless in itself. If all existence is meaningless, where do meanings come from? From man himself. This gives man total freedom and total resopnsibility to choose the meanings he wishes to assign to existence. It makes man not a discoverer of meanings, but the creator of all meaning.

Human subjectivity is the focus of currere, William Pinar's orientation toward educational research and curriculum implementation. The following quotation expresses Pinar's view:

> Within his responses to the curriculum the student is continually experiencing himself, and it is to that experience of self that currere turns (Pinar & Grumet, 1976).

One manifestation of Pinar's theory in practice is autobiography. By asking student teachers to write about their own educational experiences, Pinar is asking them "to examine this object, their

experience transformed into autobiography, and to identify the assumptions embedded in its reflections, not of the past but of the present." Another quotation will serve to clarify Pinar's stance.

> Thus, we are proposing that the autobiographical process be moved to the very center of humanities education because it is within that relationship of the knower to the known that education is humanizing. It is not merely coincidental that significant autobiographies are written by significant men, for that self-awareness that withdraws from the immediacy of experience, from the opaque deposits of past events and achievements and experience, as well as the source of their history. Self-report provides an attitude, as well as a process, that may protect us from becoming thinglike, obsessed with being, forgetful of the perspectivism of our experience, mistaking it for an object.

Autobiography embraces the experience of the student and values this experience as an important aspect of the curriculum.

As I read Pinar, I realize that I was attempting to practice what he calls currere in my own high school English classes. My frustration came from my inability to significantly influence an environment which bred a pervasive disregard for students (and teachers) as subjects. I met with each of my five classes for forty minutes each day. In each of those classes, I was expected to "follow the curriculum." Following the curriculum never caused me a great deal of trouble because I always seemed to find a way to mold it to students' self-interest (with varying degrees of success and failure). I found that the easiest subject in which to do this was composition. Most of my students hated to write. They were convinced that they were no good at it; but, when forced to compose, they tended to get involved with their creations. I always tried to keep the topics personal. Nothing was forbidden in composition. This often gave students the experience of a rush of confusion/elation at a kind of freedom of expression that they had never before experienced in school. Often this exhilaration overcame years of

discouragement in the writing process. I obtained a new "authentic" authority. My expertise at the mechanics and techniques of composition became important to the students and they came to me for help. I suddenly found that I was needed. I was in an enviable position like that of the doctor whose patients willingly and urgently seek him out. I had volunteers.

In composing and critiquing compositions, the student and the teacher sense that they are interacting with each other more as persons than as functions, as subjects rather than as objects. In the majority of high schools this is relatively rare, and there are good reasons why. First of all, teachers meet with over a hundred students per day. This makes meaningful interaction over each student's work impossible because of time limititations. Secondly, with the force of traditional "subject" curricula and the added momentum of the "back to basics" movement, there is tremendous pressure for teachers to concentrate upon particular skills as such skills are delineated by behavioral objectives. The interaction of subject-matter-focus and time-per-student limitations creates a situation whose usual result may be called the assembly line model of education. The high school student makes nine stops per day on the assembly line; at each stop a different component of his/her person is manipulated. The whole person as subject is rarely of concern. Individual differences are given lip-service, but not substantial regard. After a time teachers are likely to become as numb as assembly workers or so frustrated that they drop out.

It is important to notice that at this point in our discussion the terms "subjectivity" and "individual differences" came together. This is because the qualitative and the quantitative researchers are approaching the same conclusion: the assembly line model of secondary

education is failing many students in many important ways. It fails both in treating students as subjects and in treating them as objects. It fails in diagnosing and treating individual differences as well as in engaging subjectivity. This conclusion places a great burden on educational researchers to devise models for secondary education which will be sensitive to both individual differences and individual subjectivity.

Generally, in the United States, basic needs have been met. When fulfillment of basic needs was in question, the whole person was more easily engaged in education because it was a matter of survival. Now that basic needs have been satisfied, the affluent nations must address the questions of value and meaning. Why survive? How should we live? It is not sufficient to diagnose and treat; now educators must also face the problem of engaging the whole person in making meaning of it all. Eventually this fact must have tremendous implications for both educational policy and methodology. This paper will explore the possibilities of applying existential literature and philosophy in this task of engaging subjectivity and making meaning.

IF SISYPHUS WENT TO HIGH SCHOOL

In the literature on the subject of existentialism and education there is some discussion of using existential literature in high schools, but virtually all of it may be characterized as having an elitist tone. In fact, almost all treatments of existentialism and education are written by scholars exclusively for scholars without direct application for practitioners. If existentialism is going to be seriously applied to education as a whole, it will need to be made accessible to actual, practicing teachers. This research is an attempt to apply the philosophy of existentialism to actual high school

experiences, situations, and problems. It is not an attempt to praise the successes of the public high school, but to explore its failures and make recommendations for improvements.

Since existentialism concerns itself with the personal perceptions and experiences of the individual, and since I consider myself an existentialist, in order for this essay to be credible rather than entirely speculative, it will be necessary for me to establish that I have experience teaching in high school. My research instrument is my human organism. The ultimate authority for what I say will be my experience. I am not a solipsist; so, of course, my experience must be shown to coincide with that of others in the field. Although my experience may, in some respects, be more extreme than the experiences of most teachers, I expect that practically all teachers in American high schools will be able, to greater or lesser degrees, to identify with my report. I will show that existentialism is not a philosophy only for the elite, advantaged student, but that it may be applied with great effect (possibly greatest effect) where students are on the brink of dropping out.

Each existential philosopher has his own quirks and nuances. One cannot hope to represent them all. This report will primarily attempt to apply the existentialism of Albert Camus as he expressed it in The Myth of Sisyphus (1955). I am aware that Camus referred to himself as an absurdist rather than as an existentialist, but his philosophy is a revision or addition to basic existentialism. While the distinction is necessary to Camus's thought (and to mine), it does not remove him from the existential camp. To my mind, it makes him more sophisticated, but not radically different.

An existentialist recognizes that there is no way to ascertain the

meaning of existence, but he may choose to risk a "leap of faith." For example, he may choose to believe, blindly and irrationally, in a "God," an agent which directs existence. For the absurdist, there is no possibility of a "leap of faith" simply on the basis that such a leap would be irrational. The absurdist bears the burden of total freedom and responsibility because that is the nature, the simple fact, of being human. The absurdist lives without appeal to a higher authority.

For Albert Camus, the absurdist, the Greek myth of Sisyphus represents the dilemma of modern, existential man. Sisyphus was King of Corinth. One day he happened to see a mighty eagle, greater and more splendid than any mortal bird, bearing a maiden to an island far away. When the river god Asopus came to him to tell him that his daughter Aegina had been carried off (he strongly suspected by Zeus) and to ask his help in finding her, Sisyphus told him what he had seen. Thereby he drew down on himself the relentless wrath of Zeus. In Hades he was punished by having to try forever to roll a rock uphill which forever rolled back upon him (E. Hamilton, 1940).

This report views the myth of Sisyphus as a metaphor for the vast numbers of high school students and teachers who go through daily school rituals unable to discover personal meaning in their work. This metaphor may be especially vivid for those students who push the rock of liberal scholarship up the hill to graduation only to find it roll back on them in the form of unemployment or in jobs where it is inapplicable and useless.

AN ENVIRONMENT CONDUCIVE TO EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS

Teachers, like most other workers, often fall into habits and routines; but there are times when they are made keenly aware of the magnitude of the task in which they are engaged. This sometimes happens

to me when I meet people whose vocations and work situations are different from mine.

I play basketball on Tuesday nights in Oak Park, Illinois. Most of the participants are strangers to each other, rather than previously organized teams. Every Tuesday night for 12 or 14 weeks the same men gather at the junior high school, choose teams, play ball for two and a half hours and go their separate ways. One Tuesday night last year near the end of the basketball season, someone suggested we all go out for a few beers to replace vital body fluids. I joined the group.

As we sat in Duffy's Tavern, a cozy, dark-wood paneled bar on Madison Avenue in Forest Park, we began to get acquainted. We asked each other the usual questions, I suppose, and exchanged the usual replies. Jobs and careers came up, and when I said that I was a high school English teacher in Chicago, I became the center of a sudden, hushed attention.

"Where do you teach?"

"Hirsch High School. It's on the South Side, around 78th and Cottage Grove."

"Oh yeah? Isn't that mostly black?"

"It's all black except for Elena Benavides."

There are startled smiles and the wide eyes with question marks in them that seem to ask with a mixture of awe and amusement, "Well, I'll be damned! You really teach in a place like that?" The group was all white, but many blacks who know Hirsch display knowing but similar responses. The fact is that an all black school on the South or West Sides of Chicago, if it is not a magnet or technical school, is likely to have severe disadvantages. At a school like Hirsch, problems can be especially severe because the brightest children in the neighborhood are

able to opt for schools with selective admissions leaving the non-academically oriented kids to attend the neighborhood school.

"What's it like?"

"That must really be an experience."

I give my usual recital about how Hirsch is a dumping ground for the under-achievers and the slow kids, some intelligent kids but mostly dull ones from poor and working-class backgrounds who have very little idea what they are doing in Hirsch High School or where they are going when they leave. Students who know what they want usually go to nearby Chicago Vocational High School to get it. Yes, I've had high school seniors who could barely read. Yes, smoking marijuana is common. It's done in the park, in the locker rooms, in the halls, in the washrooms. Yes, there is violence. A few years ago, a fourteen-year-old boy was shot to death in the auditorium over a nickle in a card game. Last year there were two stabbings and numerous lunchroom brawls and plate-throwing incidents. A few weeks earlier, I had taken a knife away from a student in my freshman class. I've been threatened with a gun. Most of the students at Hirsch will be characterized by teachers as slow academically and lazy, but generally docile and friendly. People think that because there is occasional violence in a school, the school is an impossible place to teach. This is not necessarily so. Yes, Hirsch is at times a rough school, but this is not the main problem. In spite of the few sensational incidents I believe that Hirsch students are fundamentally the same as most high school students throughout the country--basically uninvolved (See Inside High School by Philip Cusick, for example).

The typical mental state of the student can be described as a kind of bored, self-interest. Most are concerned with gratifying immediate

needs within the immediate environment. History teachers are acutely aware of this when students include Canada as one of the fifty states; or when a history teacher asks about the diplomatic recognition of China and a student replies, "President Carter went over there, wasn't it?" Most of all, the teacher is frustrated by the questions and remarks students volunteer:

"Do you give homework on weekends?"

"Can you lend me a pen?"

"You never told me we were getting a test!"

"What kind of car do you drive?"

It often seems that the chief preoccupation of the girls is making themselves up. Meanwhile the boys are "making" the girls. Herman Arthur, who teaches in an integrated school in New York City, concludes:

> Any teacher looking at the bored faces can tell that the real problem is indifference. Time and again the question arises, "What do we have to learn this for?" Or more bluntly, "Why do you keep asking questions? Why don't you just tell us what you want us to know?"
>
> I tell them that there is no funnel in their heads into which I can pour the magic elixir of knowledge. They have to figure out answers for themselves. They have to think, not receive judgments from mountaintops. Anyway, I haven't been up the mountain lately.
>
> There is no suspension of disbelief about my statement, just fatalistic acceptance. If that's the way Mr. Arthur wants it, that's the way it is, but what does all this have to do with us?

These are the sentiments of a teacher experiencing despair. Something is wrong. Quite naturally, he is blaming the students. The same thing has happened in the English classes of Hirsch High School. It's useless to read Shakespeare, British classics, poetry, books, all the things the English teacher loves. The students simply are not impressed with our dogmatic assertions that "It's good for you." So what do teachers do? Back to basics. Teach grammar and parts of speech, circle correct

answers, fill blanks, get out the workbooks. The students seem as indifferent as ever, but it is not as painful for the teacher (or the students for that matter). Busy-work kills the time, and it's comforting to believe that the task is impossible because then you don't have to try. No wonder laymen are awed by the teacher's task and amused at the foolishness of attempting it.

It used to be so simple. Everyone learned the classics. You followed the curriculum. Every question had an answer. Now everyone has his own curriculum and everyone has different answers. Who is in charge? Administrators seem to hide in their offices and follow/enforce rules. Teachers go back to basics. Parents drink coffee at the P.T.A. and act gracious toward the principal. Students seem to ask, "Why are you doing this to me?" Maxine Greene (1973) refers to:

> the attacks on existing institutions, the erosion of old authorities, the restless questioning of values. The widely reported "crisis" of belief has affected ways of thinking about human nature, knowledge getting and knowledge claims, moral decisions and moral standards; and no teacher can avoid the problems this crisis creates.

It is the hypothesis of this research that the problems of belief, authority and meaning are not susceptible to solution by ordinary theories of education. What we are facing is students who are asking existential questions, questions regarding the meaning of existence: "Why should I do this? Why bother?" What we perceive as laziness, aimlessness, and indifference may be based in an inability to find meaning and, consequently, motivation. This research will begin to show that the philosophy of existentialism can be applied in concrete, practical ways to attack the aimlessness and indifference which affect high school students and teachers. More specifically, it will present applications of the philosophy of existentialism to lessons in reading

and writing.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Before I get into particulars, it will be necessary to discuss existentialism and its relationship to education. There is a fallacy involved in considering existentialism a theory of education; and, since this fallacy is harmful to an appreciation of the applications of existentialism, it must be exposed.

In an unpublished monograph titled, "What's the Use of Theory?" Van Cleve Morris, author of Existentialism in Education, but not, in my reading of his work, an avowed existentialist, delineates five theories of education which have been developed over the last century. I will paraphrase briefly:

> 1. Training the mind as a muscle, a theory of training in the classics which dates back to Aristotle and Plato.
>
> 2. Filling the mind like a two-gallon jug, which holds that the mind is a receptacle capable of holding knowledge if we can only find the proper way to fill it. This, basically, is the theory behind the "mastery-learning" of Professor Benjamin Bloom.
>
> 3. Educating the mind as a problem-solving organ. This is the theory of John Dewey and William Kilpatrick. In this theory, "Experience is the best teacher." The student learns best by encountering life's problems and solving them.
>
> 4. Modifying behavior through positive reinforcement. This is the behaviorism of B. F. Skinner, which holds that the human being is a bio-machine and that learning is nothing more than a process of conditioning and modifying behavior through positive reinforcement.
>
> 5. Awakening the learner's inner self. Morris says that the basis for this theory is the philosophy of existentialism whose chief proponent is Jean-Paul Sartre.

After delineating the five theories, Morris goes on to say:

> As one can see, these theories differ as to how they view the human being. They have different conceptions, one might say of human nature. But implicit in their

> outlooks is also a difference in how they view the purpose of education itself, a process which is intended to happen to the individual, a process to be laid upon the human nature. (Morris's italics)

It is here that my conception of existentialism is at odds with that of Morris; for, while it is true that the first four theories involve plans or processes of education, it is a misconception that the philosophy of existentialism involves such a plan.

Existentialism (from the absurdist point of view) is not a plan of action or something that happens to an individual. It is not a process, but a realization that all existence is meaningless in itself, and that it is man who creates meaning. It is true that existentialists probably would advocate that teachers help students to attain this realization, not because existentialists advocate any special social or educational process or system but because this existential fact, like it or not, is inescapable. George Kneller, in Existentialism and Education (1964), will help to clarify this point.

> Existentialism is not to be considered a systematic philosophy in the traditional sense; rather, it permeates philosophies; it is an act of philosophizing. Hence, educational theory and practice may only be inferred or implied. The fact that no existentialist has written formally on the problem of education may indicate the difficulty of transferring theory into the "practical policy" demanded by education. It may also reflect the existentialist's indifference or lack of interest in the subject.

It is important that existentialism not be confused with pseudo-existential movements such as "search-for-self," "encounter," EST, and other self-oriented ideologies because such ideologies can be seen to have purposes (e.g. personal happiness, enrichment, etc.) extraneous to that of the true philosopher--correct reasoning.

The principle which unifies any thinkers who would call themselves existentialists is the principle that, "Existence precedes essence."

Jean-Paul Sartre, probably the chief modern proponent of existentialism, provides a useful definition which was quoted earlier in this paper but which is so important it will be repeated here.

> What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards defines himself. If man, as the existentialist sees him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterwards will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be.... Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence. Man is nothing other than what he makes himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism. It is what is called "subjectivity."

The idea that "existence precedes essence" is opposed to the traditional, Western, Platonic view that the "essence precedes existence," in other words that man and all creation have an inherent purpose and meaning. This is a very important distinction. The Platonist tries to discover the inherent meanings in the world, the "nature" of things. But the existentialist begins with the understanding that all existence is meaningless in itself. If all existence is meaningless, where do meanings come from? From man himself. This gives man total freedom and total responsibility to choose the meanings he wishes to assign to existence. It makes man not a discoverer of meanings, but the creator of all meaning.

For most existentialist writers the realization that existence is meaningless is very disheartening to the man who experiencees it. To Albert Camus (1948) it is analogous to a plague, an affliction of the spirit which has the power to kill. To Franz Kafka (1948) it is like awakening one morning to discover that you are a cockroach. Camus (1946) agrees with Kafka in that he sees existential man as a "stranger," a misfit unable to discover meaning in anything, unable to

share the meanings of others. To Camus, the realization of the absurdity of existence raises the central question of existentialism (the "absurd" to Camus), "Why not commit suicide?"

> A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. All healthy men having thought of their own suicide, it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death (Camus, 1955).

HIGH SCHOOL EXISTENTIALISTS

Most readers would probably feel that a discussion of suicide is hardly appropriate when examining high school pedagogy, but the fact is that teachers are observing their students commit suicide on a scale previously unrecorded. Of course, they are not shooting themselves with pistols in the midst of classroom discussion; but, if suicide is defined as behavior detrimental to life and health, and if we include personality suicide (various types of escape from responsibility, pain, etc.), then high school students are, to a frightening degree, suicidal. Camus (1955) says, "Everything is ordered in such a way as to bring into being that poisoned peace produced by thoughtlessness, lack of heart, or fatal renunciations."

The drug culture has become a part of school life. Students engage in forms of "dropping out" such as: becoming pregnant, chronically watching television, gang involvement, using alcohol, smoking cigarettes, joining religious cults, the "pimp" mentality, "disposable" relationships, and other activities (passivities?) which range from the seemingly innocuous to the obviously dangerous and suicidal. For example, four Hirsch Students were killed in a head-on collision. They

were reported to have been traveling at speeds up to 100 m.p.h. on 87th Street in Chicago. Camus (1955) says, "I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living."

There is a fascination with suicide that reaches cult proportions in the adulation of rock stars who are obviously killing themselves (Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, etc.--dead of drug-related causes) and others who commit mock suicides and murders as essential parts of their performances (Kiss, Alice Cooper, and Jim Morrison again). In discussing suicide, need we even mention Rev. Jim Jones and Guyana? Many of our students are judging that life is not worth living and most of them are at least pondering the question. We must not think that just because they are young they do not question the meaning and worth of existence. "At any streetcorner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face" (Camus, 1955).

It is becoming obvious where my argument is leading. If we are truly going to educate our students, must we not begin to answer the questions that they are subliminally asking? It must become the teacher's job to bring students' real questions into the school. Right now the school appears to be the last place that students would look. The schools are still almost exclusively Platonic in outlook. This means that they see themselves as possessing the answers, the absolutes. Teachers see their role as one of imparting knowledge and transferring culture and such. But, while the teacher's view of her role has not changed much, the foundations which have supported that view are gradually being eroded. Maxine Greene (1973) puts it this way:

> But it seems also to be the case that numerous teachers in America have been feeling the ancestral confidence--in mind, in individual potency--somehow drain away. They have faced apathy and withdrawal in their classrooms; they have felt the disenchantment of children who cannot

> "believe".... They have become aware of moral ambiguities and the rejection of traditional codes.

Many teachers are experiencing confusion. I hear their questions: "Where am I going wrong with these kids? When I was in school, the teacher lectured and gave assignments, and you worked your butt off to learn the work. These kids could care less. I give them the answers the day before a test, and half of them still fail." Students are no longer satisfied with the reasons we supply for learning the humanities. History: "It will help you to be a better citizen." Literature: "You will become acquainted with the greatest thoughts and experiences of mankind." Students: "So what does all that have to do with me?" Teachers are having to face the fact that students will no longer accept simplistic answers as motivation for studying. They are too sophisticated.

The reasons for their sophistication are various, but a plausible one, in my view, is the explosion of information through instantaneous communications. Marshall McLuhan in Understanding Media (1964) says:

> The drop-out situation in our schools at present has only begun to develop. The young student today grows up in an electronically configured world. It is a world not of wheels but of circuits, not of fragments but of integral patterns. The student today lives mythically and in depth. At school, however, he encounters a situation organized by means of classified information. The subjects are unrelated. They are visually conceived in terms of a blueprint. The student can find no possible means of involvement for himself, nor can he discover how the educational scene relates to the "mythic" world of electronically processed data and experience that he takes for granted. As one IBM executive puts it, "My children had lived several lifetimes compared to their grandparents when they began grade one."

To put McLuhan's ideas in practical terms, the teacher is simply no match for electronic media when it comes to involving the student. Students accuse teachers of being boring. Teachers are "boring"

relative to television because they are limited as conveyers of information and as enablers of involvement. As a teacher talks he transmits information limited by his ability to speak words, a relatively slow process transmitting small parcels of information. Imagine how difficult it must be for students to involve themselves to any significant extent in a teacher's words. It has been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Imagine how much information is conveyed by television which creates pictures at the speed of light. It is easy to envision the wide-eyed, open-mouthed involvement of TV viewers captivated, entranced, involved in the mind-suckling boob tube. Conclusion: teachers cannot compete with electronic media simply as conveyers of information or as engagers of human subjectivity. In this connection, it is thought by McLuhan (1964), instantaneous electronic communication has also resulted in a lessened need for reading and writing as conveyers of information with coinciding drops in reading scores and well-documented complaints of college composition teachers.

To reiterate, if the teacher's primary function is seen as a conveyer of information, then the teacher is obsolete because merely conveying objective information by word of mouth is obsolete. If the teacher is going to play an effective role, it will have to be as a guide to the interpretation of information, a helper in the structuring of meanings out of an infinite array of messages. Teachers must begin to help students to successfully manipulate an environment whose only constant is change.

If children have access to so much information, why do we not see them as well-educated? The point is that they are not personally involved in interpreting and organizing and making meaning out of all the information they receive. The problem is not so much that teachers

are boring, but that the teachers insist on allowing the students to be boring. When it comes to being entertained, children today are very stilted. They expect to be entertained well. Now it is the teacher's job to rouse students out of their enforced passivity and demand that they entertain themselves. An existentialist view would see being bored as a matter of choice. If I am bored, I am really boring myself. Sisyphus could become very bored with rolling that rock up the hill; but, according to Camus (1955), "Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

Combine all this with the conclusion that students are unable to accept, "believe," our dogmatic assertions of value or our authority or our answers or our meanings, and we have established the need for an approach to education which takes as its first assertion the inescapable fact that there is no meaning outside of man himself, that man's nature is that of meaning-maker. Camus (1955) says, "The worm is in man's heart. That is where it must be sought." This gives the individual the freedom and responsibility to educate (create meanings for, define) himself. "Outside of that single fatality of death, everything, joy or happiness, is liberty. A world remains of which man is the sole master. What bound him was the illusion of another world" (Camus, 1955).

Somehow it seems that today's high school students have apprehended, however intuitively or subconsciously, the fact that all meaning, all authority, all answers originate with the individual. McLuhan (1964) states, "The existential philosophy, as well as the Theater of the Absurd, represent anti-environments that point to the critical pressures of the new electric environment. Jean-Paul Sartre, as much as Samuel

Becket and Arthur Miller, has declared the futility of blueprints and classified data and 'jobs' as a way out." The curriculum must begin with the student. He is the seat of authority, the creator of meaning. This is not a liberal assertion based on the Rousseau-like belief in man's inherent goodness; it is a simple statement based on the existential fact that in absolute terms man is nothing, neither good nor bad, until he makes something of himself.

THE EXISTENTIALIST AS TEACHER

The argument having been made for demolishing curricula as they now exist, I will contradict myself and acknowledge that such an idea is impractical in the near future given the social importance and the actual successes of our present public school system. The point is that it is entirely feasible for the present system to adapt itself to existential teaching/learning strategies. Even if a different system were preferable, it is simply not within the scope of this paper to propose an alternative to the present public school system. Our schools do educate a large proportion of students to the satisfaction of the majority of the population, but the reported declines in test scores indicate a major failure too. Also, public schools continue to fail the poor and minorities. Much of that failure has been caused by cultural arrogance and a refusal to acknowledge the validity of differing points of view and ways of meaning. Existentialism can serve as an antidote to this arrogance and imposition.

> To take a stranger's vantage point on everyday reality is to look inquiringly and wonderingly on the world in which one lives. It is like returning home from a long stay in some other place. The homecomer notices details and patterns in his environment he never saw before. He finds that he has to think about local rituals and customs to make sense of them once more (Greene, 1973).

Let us now discuss ways of applying existentialism to actual

classroom practice. Camus says:

> And if it is true, as Nietzche claims, that a philosopher, to deserve our respect, must preach by example, you can appreciate the importance of that reply, for it will precede the definitive act. (My italics)

Just as the philosopher must preach by example, so is this true for the existential teacher. In a Platonic system, a teacher need only know the "right" to teach or enforce it. He need not necessarily understand it, although that would, of course, be favorable. If, however, a teacher is an existentialist, he must acknowledge total freedom and total responsibility for his actions. He must be authentic and lucid. Van Cleve Morris (1966) defines authenticity:

> And who is authentic? The individual whose example is perhaps beyond the reach of most of us: the individual who is free and who knows it, who knows that every deed and word is a choice and hence an act of value creation, and, finally and perhaps decisively, who knows that he is the author of his own life and must be held personally responsible for the values on behalf of which he has chosen to live it, and that these values can never be justified by referring to something or somebody outside himself.

Camus (1955) says of lucidity:

> Being aware of one's life, one's revolt, one's freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum.
>
> A sub-clerk in the post office is the equal of a conqueror if consciousness is common to them. All experiences are indifferent in this regard. There are some that do either a service or a disservice to man.

From the student's point of view, an authentic teacher is one who is "for real." Of an authentic teacher, a Hirsch student might say with some measure of respect, "That dude is crazy, but he ain't bullshittin', man." The authentic teacher is crazy because to him, as to Ivan Karamazov of Dostoevsky's Brothers Karamazov, "All is permitted." In school this means that all subjects are permitted. All questions may be asked. All answers may be attempted. All language may

be spoken. All feelings may be expressed. The authentic teacher "ain't bullshittin'" because every rule he makes has been chosen. He understands their purpose, and he believes in them. For this reason, he enforces them. In the classroom all authority is personal, not arbitrary just because he is enforcing school rules. The authentic teacher has authority and power by the very fact that he realizes that, "All is permitted," and that it is he who establishes order and creates meaning. This is not to deny that in extreme situations the teacher will need to rely on external institutional authority; it is merely to assert that the existential teacher must "preach by example" or, in Camus's (1955) words, "to live without appeal."

> What he demands of himself is to live solely with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is, and to bring in nothing that is not certain. He is told that nothing is. But this at least is a certainty. And it is with this that he is concerned: he wants to find out if it is possible to live without appeal.

This insistence is actually what Camus claims to distinguish himself, the absurdist, from other existentialists. The difference is that the existentialist allows himself a "leap of faith" ala Kierkegaard or Dostoevsky, whereas the absurdist chooses to live without appeal to a faith or system of values. If a teacher falls back on external authority to answer a question of value or meaning; if he says, for example, "because the Bible says so," he is "bullshittin'."

THE EXISTENTIALIST AS STUDENT

It is by now common educational lore that children come to first grade full of energy and enthusiasm for learning, but that by the time they reach the first year of high school they are bored and indifferent. It has been the thrust of this paper that educators have curricularized and departmentalized and taxonomized and atomized things into such

little pieces that students have lost the organic, holistic, existential joy of being and creating.

Camus says, "...the absurd joy par excellence is creation. 'Art and nothing but art,' said Nietzsche; 'we have art in order not to die of the truth.'" By the time they have reached high school good students are those who follow orders well. They fill blanks, circle answers, look up items of information, memorize answers, and do other clearly prescribed tasks well. In language study, they circle verbs that agree with subjects and memorize parts of speech. At Hirsch there are many such "good" students, but most are turned off to this completely. Just mention parts of speech and see the blank, empty stare of indifference and disgust come into students' eyes. But teachers insist, "If I don't do anything else this year, I'm going to finally teach these kids the parts of speech!" Teachers settle for success in teaching smaller and smaller fragments of information, and they turn out more and more illiterates, people who can make great circles but cannot read or write effectively.

> For a very long time--through most of the history of civilization, I suspect--the teacher's major concern was with product.... The inherent shortcomings of this traditional orientation are all too obvious. It easily could and did, lead to over-reliance on models and tradition, insensitivity to individual characteristics, and blindness or indifference to originality. In short, teachers could, and did, "kill" creativity (Matott, 1976).

The existentialist sees the futility of all this. "The worm is in the heart. That is where it must be sought" (Camus, 1955). We must deal with students as people (subjects), not merely as automatons (objects). We have no choice but to encourage them to take charge of their learning. What good is teaching grammar if we are not allowing students to communicate, to express, to create? Frank Merchant (1976)

in a paper titled "Existential Grammar for Composition," discusses the need for students to be involved in the process of communication and creation that is composition before grammar is relevant.

> As an English teacher, I find myself surprised to have grown old in the belief that composition is the essence of my subject.... Without the production for compositions, grammar is useless, however amusing or prestigious it may become to those interested in playing its game for the sake of itself.... The creations of grammar are the pictures, actions, arguments of compositions, according to their effectiveness. Its terms cannot remain abstract, operating by themselves; the treatment of specific words for production is their life and reference, without which grammar patterns are less than mere line or sound abstractions.

Statements like this bode ill for the textbook industry because they make the student the central focus of the educational process rather than the materials and technology. The real "back to basics" movement is the student sitting down with pen and paper and creating, saying what is on his mind, attempting answers to his questions in the most fluent and clear ways possible.

The field of communication, reading and writing, is the vehicle for students to engage authentic questions. We have discussed the problem of indifference to learning grammar. It is my belief that if we admit the individual's authentic needs and concerns into the learning situation, he will be motivated to improve all of his language skills as a means of satisfying needs and pursuing concerns. He will not need to ask, "Why are you doing this to me?" He will be choosing it for himself. "Because it is satisfying my need to know and to create. It is answering my questions. It's fun. It's mine." Jean-Paul Sartre (in Morris, 1966) explains the distinction between work and play.

> Play, like Kierkegaard's irony, releases subjectivity. What is play if not an activity of which man is the first origin, for which man himself sets the rules, and which has no consequences except according to the rules posited.

Why do children become bored and indifferent in school? Because we stop their play. For the existentialist all life is play because he is responsible for everything. He chooses; he sets the rules. To do otherwise is to be inauthentic.

Let us discuss authenticity again from the student's point of view. Definition: authenticity is not assuming false attitudes to placate the situation of the moment. In a communication class, being authentic means composing and communicating and questioning and arguing about any real-life concern. It means "getting personal," not necessarily in the sense of revealing secret or intimate information, but in the sense of writing about things one knows well. For the students of Hirsch, this may mean a composition about "moving" (dancing), at home, in the street, at a "set" (party). It may mean a discussion of forms of suicide: drugs, alcohol, sexual dependence, over-eating. It may mean an examination of the role of the father, a subject on which Hirsch students have strong and informed opinions. It may be anything that a person really wants to communicate about. An inauthentic student writes to please the teacher and to get a good grade. An authentic student writes to please himself; and, since a healthy person is not a solipsist, he writes to communicate effectively and to create beautifully. The existential teacher has the responsibility to create an aura of authenticity by the fact that he is authentically involved in creating and questioning meanings. If a student perceives that he is not going to be judged from the teacher's absolute standards and values, he will often feel free to discuss genuine concerns.

Reading and writing are two sides of the same coin. When a student begins to write about authentic matters, he will also want to read to satisfy his need to know about those matters. Frank Merchant (1976)

discusses this.

> Although there appear to be principles of some methodology involved in those operations (grammatical transformations), I know that writers perform them by a feeling of acquaintance, mainly with literature, and a feeling for language rising from habit not from recollecting some generalized mechanics, as one might do disastrously, in trying to reinstruct oneself in how to walk.... We have come to the notion that our practice of grammar may result in an art, literature being in its deed the art's first step.... Combining words in structures from sentences to epics and novels creates mental, emotional and social structures richer or more meaningful than those surrounding recited words.

Composition leads to literature, and literature leads to composition. Once again we get away from compartmentalization to a more holistic, organic approach, an approach which takes into consideration the experience of being which is the sine qua non of all learning.

EXISTENTIAL LESSON PLANS

The existential teacher must teach by example. She should ask real questions, deal with authentic concerns. In school these concerns should involve the teaching/learning process and the needs of students. If they do not the person may be an existentialist, but she is certainly not a teacher.

As an existentialist and a teacher, I attempted to engage the subjectivity of my students in a variety of ways. I did it at all levels but found it most successful with juniors and seniors in literature and composition. At Hirsch we taught in 10 week modules which students had selected. A typical selection would be: a literature module, composition (required), business English, and Black poetry. In my composition classes I would tell students that they had to write compositions that were interesting. To me "interesting" meant that they were about students' real questions and concerns, real-life situations, actual beliefs and values. They were told that they could

write about anything, using any language as long as it represented what they saw as the truth. They were limited to 15 double-spaced, handwritten pages. I told them that it was likely that I would read their papers aloud in class without identifying the authors.

I found that some students took to this approach readily. They used their papers to unburden themselves of stories, concerns, beliefs, and questions which yearned for expression. These students often went to the 15 page limit.

Other students seemed to like the idea, but were cautious, not trusting the teacher or fellow students. They tended to write under wraps, using old topics about which they had written before, topics that were safe.

Some students could hardly be coaxed to write at all. They had trouble with mechanics, had "nothing to say," were afraid of being made fun of.

I found it was important to gain their trust. To do this, I had to be authentic. I could not simply play a role. I had to express some of my real concerns, show my humanness, my willingness to try new things, to be mistaken, to be laughed at when I was not perfect.

It was wonderful that some students were eager to write and express themselves freely. Their willingness to be authentic encouraged the others to try.

Somehow I would eventually get everyone to write something. Then I would read the papers to the class, careful to keep authors' identities secret. I would be honest in my appraisals of papers, and I encouraged students to be the same. If papers were difficult to read, this was obvious to both the class and the author. I expressed my chagrin at the poor writing because I felt it important for people to express

themselves clearly. The thoughts that writers expressed were always valued. Questions were raised. Interest was expressed. The inability to write became an obvious handicap to expressing oneself. As students came to prize self-expression, more and more they began to prize good writing. Existential authenticity had become the key to the improvement of composition skills.

In my literature classes I did not allow students to pick their own books because I had tried this approach before and found that many students would use books they had read for other classes or that they would choose things that were wildly inappropriate given their reading level (e.g. The Sound and the Fury by William Faulkner) or that they simply would not choose anything. I taught a course called "Transition: Adolescence to Adulthood." In spite of the title, many students chose it. I taught three books in the following order: 1) Black Boy by Richard Wright, 2) Manchild in the Promised Land by Claude Brown, and 3) The Catcher in the Rye by J. D. Salinger. The first was about a black boy growing up in the rural South; the second was about a black boy growing up in Harlem; and the third was about a white boy growing up in affluent Eastern society. In important ways each of the three works concerns the protagonist's apprehension of the absurdity of existence and at least of the absurdity of his world. I chose the books because I felt they could appeal to authentic concerns of my students. They did. Some students told me that this was the first time they had read a whole book, cover to cover. Parents told me that they had never before seen their children bring books home from school and actually read them. Teachers complained to me that my students were bringing their books into math, history, etc. classes and reading them when they were not supposed to. I gave little quizzes often to be sure that students were

reading. Then we discussed the stories. These discussions led to compositions. We were reading and writing about our real, important concerns. I found that by being authentic and by encouraging students to be authentic, I had begun to engage the subjectivity of students in such a way that they found it important to improve their ability to read and write. Obviously, I attribute my perceived success to the creative, personal quest for meaning which can be existentialism.

In conclusion, we educators will continue to fail, only our failures will become increasingly more significant, unless we begin to involve the whole student in depth. We may be able to do this by becoming practitioners of existentialism. This work was the beginning of an attempt to reveal what that can mean for high school teachers and students.

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